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SUBJECT: THE NIGERIA LABOR CONGRESS MOBILIZES AGAINST
THE LABOR BILL

REF: LAGOS 1303

1. Summary. The Nigerian Labor Congress (NLC) has unveiled its plan to stop the passage of a trade union reform bill now before the national assembly. Proposed by the Presidency, the bill seeks to end the NLC's monopoly as the only recognized labor federation in Nigeria, stop automatic dues payments, and make public education and hospital strikes illegal. End Summary.

2. The National Executive Council of the NLC met in Abuja on August 16 to plan its strategy to counter the GON's proposed labor reform bill (reftel), which the NLC alleged is designed to weaken the trade union movement. It announced that it would hold a series of mass rallies to mobilize popular support against the bill and persuade the National Assembly to reject it. NLC President Adams Oshiomhole told journalists in Abuja that a nationwide rally will be held in Abuja on August 24, then in all the 36 states. Oshiomhole said labor leaders from all the industrial unions will participate in a "grand rally" at the National Assembly on August 24 to persuade the lawmakers to reject the bill. "We will go to the National Assembly and put our case across in a peaceful manner. This rally is not a strike," Oshiomhole explained. He said NLC's state councils will organize similar rallies and meet with lawmakers and other stakeholders to seek their support.

3. The labor bill was presented by the Presidency to the National Assembly in June, and it seeks to promote multiple labor federations, rather than the present structure that recognizes the Nigeria Labor Congress as the sole labor federation in Nigeria. The bill also seeks to amend the Trade Dispute Act to make employee payment of dues to trade unions voluntary and outlaw strikes in public education and health sectors. Also, trade unions will no longer legally call strikes without a two-thirds vote in favor by union members. On August 12, the labor bill was formally read on the floor of the Senate, starting deliberation on it.

4. If the bill passes at the National Assembly, the NLC will no longer be the only labor federation in Nigeria. Membership of trade unions will become voluntary, and employers will no longer deduct union dues from employees without their permission.

5. NLC spokesmen have stated on several occasions that the NLC is not opposed to a reform of the labor law, but it insists that such a reform should be the product of tripartite discussions involving all stakeholders: the NLC, the GON, and employers. The NLC claims the bill is vindictive, and merely designed to punish it, or weaken its opposition to some of the GON's economic policies, especially fuel price deregulation. The GON argues that the reforms are in line with the International Labor Organization's (ILO) recommendations, while the NLC replies that the proposed bill violates numerous sections of the ILO standards.

6. Comment. The NLC's support for labor reform may be too little, too late. When the NLC called a national strike in June, it fizzled after two days, without accomplishing its stated objective of blocking fuel deregulation. It may be difficult to motivate the Nigerian public, most of whom live hand-to-mouth, that the NLC's monopoly is essential, and it is not unlikely that the National Assembly, dominated by the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP), will pass the bill into law. From all indications, the weeks ahead will be critical to the continued survival of the NLC. End Comment.

BROWNE